

HUMILITY OF CIRCUMSTANCE **FAVOURABLE TO GODLINESS**

We are here again to refresh our minds in the water of the Word. Weary and travel-worn, we need it: necessitous, we get it wherever we may happen to apply. This time it is Isaiah. Isaiah has been called the evangelical prophet. There seems no well founded reason for this beyond the greater fulness of the Word that came by him. It is the same Word that we find in the others. Evangelical literally means having the quality of a good message. All the prophets are good message prophets while bringing presage of evil. If Isaiah had none of the terrible side of God's messages, there might be some reason for calling him the evangelical prophet. Instead of this, his book opens with a message of displeasure and judgment not exceeded by any of the prophets. God calls heaven and earth to hear what He has to say to Israel—viz, that He has brought up children but they have rebelled against Him; that while the dumb animals know their owners, Israel does not know the God who brought them from Egypt and has sustained them in all their ways. He has to speak of them as *"a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil doers, children that are corrupters."* He tells them of their body-politic, that it has no soundness in it; that the whole head is sick and the whole heart faint; that from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head there is nothing but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores. In a series of chapters he foretells the direful things that were coming on them, culminating in the gloomy picture which immediately precedes the chapter read this morning;

"They shall look unto the earth and behold trouble and darkness and dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness."

"Nevertheless," our chapter begins, *"the dimness shall not be as in her vexation when at the first He lightly afflicted the land of Naphthali and the land of Zebulun, and afterwards did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations."*

That is, the final darkness that would overtake the land would have a contemporary light with it which the first affliction of Israel had not. In the first affliction of Israel, there was no light. It was pure darkness, there was no promise or indication of good to come, but in the final tribulation, there would be light in the midst of it, as came to pass.

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. They that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."

What exactly this meant, we know by express information. We are not left to guess. Matthew, by the Spirit, informs us (Mat. 4:13-16) that it was fulfilled in the manifestation of Jesus in these very regions, in an incipient form at the least. Jesus has not yet accomplished all that this prophecy speaks of; for it speaks of a breaking of Israel's yoke *"as in the day of Midian,"* which was a day of miraculous destruction of the enemy, but he appeared in the very regions specified in the prophecy, and proclaimed himself—

"the light sent unto the world, that whosoever followed him should not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

We know that he will, at his second coming, overthrow the power of the adversary in all the land and all the earth; but we have to note that the light appeared in the darkness that was settling for a long night upon Israel 1,800 years ago. It was not light in the general sense. It was light in a special form. It was light in the birth and public manifestation of a deliverer. The prophecy itself proceeds to indicate this:

"Unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given"—an extraordinary child: a son of the most distinguished order—"his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

The giving of a name in Bible usage has much more significance than among us. We give names for the sake of distinction merely; but the Bible gives names to convey a meaning or a prophecy concerning the persons named, and sometimes concerning others. To say then that this child was to be called, '*wonderful*,' etc. was equivalent to saying that he was to be so. We look at Christ and see the applicability of these names. None so wonderful ever appeared upon earth. None among the sons of men are truly wonderful as he. Men come into being through the operation of organic law that prevails amongst countless races of creatures that inhabit the earth. There is nothing wonderful about the birth of a man except the inherent wonder that attaches to every process of nature. It is an every-day occurrence—very commonplace and of no significance in millions of cases. But the babe of Bethlehem was due to a supreme operation of the Holy Spirit—a divine initiative—which made the born child an extraordinary phenomenon—an interference with the ordinary run of affairs—a showing of the Creator's hand for a special work, possibly the most interesting work upon earth—viz., the manifestation of His glory with a view to the final purpose He had in making the earth and man upon it. "*Counsellor*" he was, as none else—in the penetration of his understanding, in the profundity of his knowledge, in the wisdom of his advice. A man following Christ's advice will walk at last into realms of perfect well-being. "*The Mighty God*" he was, in the power God gave to him; "*the everlasting Father*" both in being the manifestation of the Eternal Father, and the appointed head, leader, guide, friend, and father of the permanent order of things to be established upon the earth when God's purpose is done. And the Prince of Peace we shall see him to be when, by successful war against all nations, he shall have conquered peace that will be established in righteousness and plenty for ever more.

Consider an aspect of the case which may afford us some satisfaction and encouragement in a day when submission to the Word of God ensures rejection and shame at the hands of established respectability, and when the most robust may be tempted sometimes to doubt their own position in the presence of the universal complacency and prosperity of unbelief. Going back to the apostolic age in the light of Isaiah 9, we know for a certainty that the child born of Mary is the very personage foretold in this chapter—God's own Son whose birth is acclaimed by angels. Should we not expect then according to the popular rules of judgment that this child will be born in circumstances of comfort and plenty, and should we not expect his infancy to be tended by the hands of opulency and distinguished attention? Will not his boyhood be attended and guarded by every adjunct of honour and care? Will not his manhood be splendid in popularity and renown? Will not his mission be hailed by the whole nation in glad submission? Will not his voice command universal respect and obedience? Surely, the religion and learning of his age will hasten to prostrate themselves before the Lord's anointed? Surely nothing but influence, prestige, wealth, and success await the undoubted Prince of Peace? How different the case was from this, you know. Cradled in lowly circumstances, brought up in a mountain village of barren repute, educated at a carpenter's bench, revealed amongst common people, looked down upon by respectability, his words opposed, his work condemned, his professions scouted, his character hated, his life destroyed, his name cast out as evil by a hundred generations of Israel. Though "*he came to his own, HIS OWN RECEIVED HIM NOT.*" Him, "*none of the princes of this world knew;*" and as for the people, after a transient interest, excited by his miracles and wonderful teaching, they despised and rejected him. They saw nothing to desire in him. They esteemed him smitten of God and afflicted. At last they clamoured for his life and demanded a murderer to be granted to them in his place.

It is impossible to conceive of a more discouraging situation for a work of God on the earth. Yet this was the position of the very Light of God, appointed to lighten the Gentiles and glorify His people Israel. Judged by the tests that men apply, it was self-condemned. Men ask if the thing is respectable, if the learned approve—if it is popular and well supported. A

negative answer on all these points is fatal to popular approval. It was fatal in the first century. It is fatal in the present century. Here we have the Truth. There is no gainsaying it. By the very Bible which the people have in their hands, they may know it, and many do know it. Our appeal is to it; read and see. "Yes, but you have no respectable people among you. You have no learned men. You are a poor uneducated lot." We admit the charge. We have no human credentials or recommendations of any kind. When our case is examined, it is found we are nobody according to the current standard. But we have the Bible; we know it; we daily read it; we understand it; we believe it; and we try to obey it; and what other recommendation will prevail with God at last? Jesus (the rejected; the unlearned, the killed but raised again) said,

"If any man hear my voice and follow me, him will my Father honour."

This is all we claim; this is all we try to enforce, that the belief of the Father's promises and obedience of His commandments is the sole ground of acceptance with Him; and with this qualification, we can afford to be without those adjuncts that are highly esteemed among men. Nay, we can see that in the present state of things those adjuncts are liable to be barriers and hindrances to the way of truth and holiness. God so works that His claims should not rest on human prestige, but on His own authority. If the learned in the land are against us, that is in our favour; for God never has chosen the wise of this world to do His work. He so tells us by Paul. If we have no standing or prosperity, we say, neither had Christ in his day. God so works His works that no flesh should glory. We see nothing but this: that we believe what the Bible teaches, and try to do what it commands, and cannot consent to any departure from its standard. For this cause we are under reproach. We must accept it, and patiently submit for a time, and rejoice in it if we can. We know we could get on by adopting a different policy. If we would hold the thing slacker, widen it a little more, open the bands of a cheerful communion with the looseness and corruption of the churches, not calling it looseness and corruption, but other people's ways, we could sail out into the popular stream, and catch a little of the pleasant breeze and glide down the stream to the blue ocean of prosperity. But it is not possible, without treachery to the restrictions and separations enjoined by God on all who wish to be His children; and such treachery will in the end appear madness, though it may be convenient for the time being. We are in the social ditch, and we know it. There is no advantage in disguising the fact from ourselves and others. We cannot aim at a respectable standing. Respectability, as a rule is alienated from the love and obedience of God; not that non-respectability per se is any better, for, as David says, "Rich men are a lie;" as he also says, "Poor men are vanity;" it is not in any human condition of itself to be wise; but humility of circumstance is more favourable to godliness than the reverse; and therefore it is wise to be content with the fact declared by James, that "*God hath chosen the poor of this world,*" provided they be "*rich in faith.*" He has not rejected the rich but their salvation is a matter of difficulty, by reason of the unfavourable influences to which they are exposed. All this belongs to the dark side of our calling. There is a bright side. Let us look at that for we need cheering up, and this will do it. The bright side is in the very chapter before us. Having told us of the child to be born, the Son to be given (whose lot it was in the preliminary stage to be "*despised and rejected of men*"), it tells us this about him: "*the government shall be upon his shoulder . . . UPON THE THRONE OF DAVID AND UPON HIS KINGDOM.*" What brightness is this? It is the brightness of the Kingdom of God of which Jesus himself spoke:

"I appoint unto you a kingdom as my Father hath appointed unto me, that ye may eat and drink with me at my table, in my kingdom, and sit on thrones."

"Fear not little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."

"To him that overcometh, to him will I grant that he sit with me on my throne."

There is nothing more unlikely upon earth, judged from the standpoint of present appearances, than this installation of Christ and his people in the kingdom and throne of David. But see what the hope rests on; see what the verse (7) in Isaiah 9 winds up with:

"The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will perform this."

"I, the Lord, have spoken it, and will do it" (Ezek. 36:36).

Is it possible to have a more reliable guarantee? If God purpose a thing, who can hinder it? That He purposes this, He has declared many times without number, as we might say, and sometimes with a very solemn emphasis. He asks, can the ordinances of heaven and earth be interfered with? Can the immensities of space be measured, then He will depart from these purposes (Jer. 31:31-37). Can any one stop the recurrence of day and night? Then may His covenant with David be interfered with (Jer. 33:20-21). The thing may seem to lag, because, in point of fact, there was to be a long time of desolation, during which the vision would seem to tarry (Hab. 2:3; 3:17). There is a time appointed to which repeated allusion is made:

"The time to favour Zion—yea, the set time, is come"

(Psa. 102).

Then— *"A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation: I the Lord will hasten it in his time"*

(Isa. 60:22).

Hasten what? Hasten the change so gloriously described in Isaiah 60; a change from utter prostration and darkness for all things Israelitish to a position of ascendancy and renown.

"The sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee, for in My wrath I smote thee, but in My favour have I had mercy on thee . . ."

"The nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted. The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree and the pine tree and the box together, to beautify the place of My sanctuary; and I will make the place of My feet glorious. The sons of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet, and they shall call thee, the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated so that no man went through thee, I will make thee an eternal excellency, the joy of many generations . . . I the Lord will hasten it in his time."

In view of such great and precious promises, of which we have become fellow heirs through the adoption that is in the gospel for all who believe and obey it, we may well wait. God says He will do it, and He will do what He says. There is no room for doubt. We have every guarantee our situation admits of. The Bible alone is enough. It is God's pillar—God's monument, in the earth. It is no myth. It is here—a reality in all the earth. It defies putting aside. It defies explaining away. It is its own witness when read and pondered. It is no possible invention. It is in the hands of the enemies of the Truth. Wherever we go, though we may find the Truth an outcast, we find the Bible an honoured guest. It is in the hands of many millions who cherish it, though they don't read or understand it. It is on the pedestal, and men bow down to it, though they do not believe it. In this there is great comfort for us when we come to enquire how the Bible has got into such a position. It has come into it through what it is in itself, and through the actual events of the work of God connected with its production—And the Jews are God's witnesses. There they are in the very position long ago foretold, wanderers among the nations, carrying with them wherever they go Moses and the prophets which give us their history (under the seal and sanction of Christ, who endorsed Moses and the prophets in his day). All the dreadful things written against Israel in Moses and the

prophets have come to pass; God's Word has failed in nothing of all that He has said for 3,000 years; and His Word is full of prophecy concerning Jew and Gentile.

What then? The guarantee is before our eyes if we have eyes to see. The matter does not stand in the position of a "maybe." The ground of our hope is not hypothetical. It does not rest on something beyond reach among the stars, or concealed in the fathomless depths of the great abyss that lies under our feet. It might well be said to us, as Moses said to Israel;

"It is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven and bring it unto us that we may hear it and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us and bring it unto us that we may hear it and do it? But the Word is very nigh unto thee."

The Bible, which we see exalted in the land and which we treasure in our own private studies, is a great and palpable reality which brings all other realities with it to enlightened conviction. The Bible in the earth means that God is in heaven, and that Christ lives, and that the purpose of God will come to pass in the restoration of Israel and the salvation of all his people. He that caused "the dimness of anguish" to come will bring the everlasting joy. He that brought the darkness and the desolation will cause righteousness and light and praise to spring forth before all nations . . . He that in anger overthrew the house of David in the hands of rebellious kings will as certainly build again the tabernacle of David that is fallen down, and establish it high in all the earth in the hands of His Beloved, under whose shadow Israel will revive, the nations find peace, and the saints be saved with an everlasting salvation, even life for evermore:

"He shall sit upon it in truth, seeking judgment and hasting righteousness."

Then will glory dwell in the land and overflow to the uttermost bounds of the earth. Then shall the Lord be King over all the earth; then shall all the nations be blessed in Abraham's seed.

Shall we not share the blessing if we continue patient in our confidence in the covenanted word that pledges all these things?

Is it not written, *"Them that honour Me, I will honour,"* and *"They shall not be ashamed that wait for Me?"* These things are beyond contradiction.

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